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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: JORDANIANS AWAIT PRESIDENT'S MIDDLE EAST
STATEMENT, HOPE FOR U.S. PLAN, BUT DON'T EXPECT MUCH

Classified By: Amb. Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Jordanians, confused about the direction of U.S. Middle East policy, are nervously awaiting President Bush's Middle East policy statement, hoping (but doubting) that it will bring clarity and the prospect of genuine progress for the Palestinians. Most Jordanians see U.S. engagement in the MEPP as the only way to break the current spiral of violence, although most are also highly suspicious of U.S. motives and doubt U.S. commitment to take hard decisions regarding Israel. In the end, it is the concrete results of any new U.S. proposal -- not the words of the President's remarks -- to which Jordanians will look to measure American resolve to reach peace. END SUMMARY.

WAITING TO EXHALE

2. (C) The withdrawal of Israeli forces from most of the West Bank in May, and the consequent reduction of daily Palestinian casualty and arrest figures, has reduced the level of tension in Jordan: the loudest wedding season for the past two years has begun, and students are sitting for the annual end of secondary school "tawjihi" exams. Even regular Israeli raids in the West Bank and Gaza have not entirely soured the sense that something is happening on the Middle East peace front. Jordanians have been mildly encouraged as a procession of Middle Eastern leaders -- PM Sharon, King Abdullah, President Mubarak, PM Sharon again, and Saudi Prince Saud -- have visited the White House and given the President their views on where they think the Middle East should go next. Statements by the President, the Secretary, and other senior U.S. officials that the President

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is weighing his options on next steps have heightened the sense that a new U.S. initiative is just around the corner.

U.S. POLICY CONFUSING... AND CONFUSED

3. (C) While our contacts are generally skeptical that the speech will provide new U.S. support for the Palestinians, there is no agreement on what it will mean for the region. In fact, there is a clear sense here -- heightened by local and Western press commentary -- that the U.S. has not yet settled on the next steps of its policy. "The (U.S.) President says he supports a Palestinian state," one NGO leader told us recently, "but what kind of State? Real? Provisional? What are its borders? What is its capital?"

4. (C) Pointing to differing statements from various officials, many see a distinct split within the U.S. administration. "When," a senior MFA official asked us late last week, "is the U.S. going to decide what its policy is." The lack of clarity in U.S. policy, according to one academic, has "left us (in the Middle East) without direction."

WHAT WILL BUSH SAY? WILL HE BACK IT UP?

5. (C) Consequently, a wide variety of Embassy contacts and local editorial writers have focused their attention on what President Bush will (or should) say about the future of U.S. policy in the region. "Most," said a senior Jordanian banker, "assume that U.S. policy will be biased toward Israel," especially following President Bush's recent statements that Sharon is a "man of peace," that the President is not prepared to offer a timetable for creation of a Palestinian state, and the President's persistent focus on Arafat's responsibility to act against Palestinian terrorists.

6. (C) However, statements by the Secretary at the G-8 meeting in Canada about the possibility of creating a "provisional" Palestinian state, and Western and Israeli

press speculation that the U.S. will call for an end to Israeli settlement activity have raised hopes among some in the educated elite that the U.S. will set out a political plan that leads to a Palestinian state and asks Israel to take concrete actions.

17. (C) The many nay sayers, however, doubt U.S. commitment to peace in the Middle East, and dismiss out of hand suggestions that the U.S. will try to force Israel to accept even minimal Palestinian political demands. One Jordan University professor declared that, public statements aside, "no U.S. President has ever supported (creation of) a Palestinian state." An always-cranky former Parliamentarian opined last week that any new U.S. proposal would be merely "a tool to keep Arab regimes in the War against Terrorism." In any case, he concluded, "the Zionist lobby and the Christian right" will prevent "any plan that Israel does not like" from being implemented.

COMMENT

18. (C) The bad news is that most Jordanians remain very skeptical about U.S. motives and U.S. commitment to use its position to deliver concrete Israeli concessions. Those who doubt U.S. motives will see even a positive speech as a way to create motion in the peace process without real progress. A presidential statement that offers no concrete political gains for Palestinians and focuses on Palestinian responsibilities (to reform, fight terrorism, or choose a new leader) to the exclusion of needed Israeli actions could lead to another round of demonstrations and other expressions of public anger.

19. (C) The good news is that most Jordanians -- even many of the nay sayers -- continue to see U.S. engagement as the only way to solve the Middle East crisis. Consequently, there is intense attention focused on the President's statement, and more than a little heightening of expectations among those who hope for a U.S. role that offers more hope to the Palestinians. For Jordanians, however, the test of the President's speech will not be the specific words he utters or the plan he presents, but whether the U.S. takes concrete actions to move forward on Palestinian political goals in parallel with moves to ensure Israel's security.

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